

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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RICHARD E. DECKER, Publisher

WILLIAM MANNERS, Editorial Director
G. F. FOSTER, Managing Editor
MEINRAD MAYER, Art Director

PAT HITCHCOCK, Associate Editor
LISA BELKNAP, Associate Editor
BARBARA REMINGTON, Illustrator

POLITICS is SIMPLY

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BY JACK RITCHIE

HERMIONE is a woman of noble proportions, resembling, in part, a grenadier sergeant who has not exhaled in twenty years. "I haven't the slightest desire," she said, "merely to exchange one blackmailer for another."

"Of course not, Madam," I agreed. "And your fears are groundless. I am a man of honor and never in my entire career have I resorted to blackmailing one of my clients. I confine myself strictly within my talents, inclinations, and profession. In short, I murder, and that is all."

We had a table in Lustow's, where the waiterships are hereditary and the ceilings distant. Hermione is the widow of the late Senator Abner Trotter. Three years ago she married Frederick Combs and he is now running for Congress in the sixth district.

She came to a decision. "Very well. I think you're the man for the job. At least Mrs. Berling recommends you highly and that is good enough for me."

The Mrs. Berling she referred to is a charming lady who has been deprived of three of her husbands in the last seven years. She is one of my more consistent and therefore profitable customers.

"The man I want you to dispose of is Edmund Pelletier," Hermione said. "Or at least that is the name he uses. He has a suite in the Parkinson Hotel. Number 239."

"Do you have any particular time preference for his death? Most of

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my clients like the protection of a solid alibi."

"This isn't going to be quite so simple," Hermione said. "You've also got to obtain and destroy the evidence he uses for his blackmail. I leave the method to you."

"Pelletier is blackmailing you?"

She almost snorted. "No one could do that to me and get away with it. My husband is his victim."

"Ah, yes," I said. "He's running for Congress."

"He ought to make it too," Hermione said firmly. "He has a good speaking voice and he looks fine on television. That's why I married him in the first place. He's a little simple, but we manage to conceal that fact by having him talk slow. Gives voters the impression that he's thinking every minute."

The waiter brought Hermione her steak. Rare, of course. I myself prefer a steak so well done that the blood of the abattoir does not readily come to mind.

"Why is your husband being blackmailed?" I asked.

Hermione stated the fact without the slightest trace of embarrassment. "Frederick was a jewel thief before he married me. Of course I wouldn't have married him if I'd known that."

"Naturally not."

"The morality of the thing doesn't bother me a bit," Hermione made clear. "But I *am* infuriated that the blundering idiot made the mistake of getting caught at it by this Edmund Pelletier about four years before I married him. I didn't know that either until three weeks ago."

I mellowed my tongue with a sip of wine. "May I ask how you happened to meet Frederick Combs?"

"He came to a great many of my parties when Abner was still alive. Probably to steal jewelry, I imagine, but I usually keep mine in a safe deposit box at the bank. After Abner died, I looked around for a suitable replacement and Frederick happened to be there."

"A lonely woman needs love?" I suggested—a bit doubtfully.

"Love, nothing." Hermione was emphatic. "I'm a woman with drive and I find that the best outlet for that sort of thing is through a husband. I worked Abner Trotter

Politics is a word not ordinarily spoken in the presence of children. There are those who would even ban it from polite society. That it has a place in this fine bi-partisan publication is therefore quite obvious.



from the State Assembly into Washington. And if the fool hadn't killed himself in an automobile accident four years ago, he would have been in the national convention this July as a favorite son, at least."

She dipped a square of steak into the mushroom sauce. "After Abner died I did some inquiring and found that Frederick Combs came from one of the best families. Second voyage of the Mayflower. He graduated from Yale with a Gentleman's 'C', and at that point apparently his family ran out of money and Frederick was forced to resort to his wits—such as they are. But I didn't know about that last part until he came to me three weeks ago with the request that his allowance be increased."

Hermione cut through her steak. "I take care of all of Frederick's bills and allow him three hundred dollars spending money a month. He is well-fed, clothed, and occasionally liquored. In private and at home, of course. A man in politics must always be suspected of sobriety even by drinking voters."

She sipped coffee. "I demanded to know why Frederick wanted his allowance increased and he fumbled about so with feeble excuses that I knew there was more than met the ear. I immediately lowered the boom—so to speak—and after five minutes of questioning he broke down and told me the whole sordid story of his stupidity." Her

face became thoughtful. "Frederick breaks so easily."

Her eyes cleared. "Frederick has been paying two hundred dollars a month to this Edmund Pelletier for the last eight years."

From what I knew of blackmailers, that presented an item of interest. Invariably their demands increase. "The sum was consistent? Through all those years?"

"Yes. However now this Pelletier wants three hundred dollars a month."

"Pelletier waited until *now* to ask for three hundred? Surely he must have known that Frederick married a wealthy woman."

Her face became grim. "He probably realized that I would have thrown Frederick out of the house before paying a cent."

"But now?"

"But now I've spent three years grooming Frederick for our future responsibilities. Three years of toil and construction. I would find it insufferable to toss all that out of the window and have to begin all over again with someone else."

"Surely you can afford to pay Pelletier three hundred a month?"

"Of course I can. But that isn't the point. Besides the obvious possibility that Pelletier will become increasingly greedy, I must also consider the fact that I simply cannot have Frederick vulnerable to any kind of scandal. I cannot have his past catch up with him just as he is about to step into higher things."

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The evidence against Frederick must be destroyed and the black-mailer must also go because he knows about Frederick's indiscretions."

I tasted my dessert. "Very well, madam. I shall accept your commission. My usual fee is twenty thousand dollars."

She regarded me with eyes that had seldom conceded right-of-way.

"I do not haggle," I said stiffly.

Finally she nodded. "Twenty thousand it is."

That being settled, I relaxed a bit. "Does your husband know that you plan to have Pelletier done away with?"

"Of course not. Frederick would faint at the very thought of violence." She became thoughtful again. "I do like to mold putty, but now and then I do wish that Frederick would give me just a little bit of resistance."

I left Hermione a little after six and took a taxi to the cocktail bar in the west sixties where I had another appointment.

Frederick Combs occupied one of the extreme rear booths. He finished his drink and ordered for two when I sat down opposite him.

"I've had a great deal of trouble finding you," he said.

"I'm sorry, but I travel a great deal and I do not find it advisable to advertise for business in the newspapers."

Frederick Combs was approximately my age and had just the

faintest touches of gray at his temples.

"I finally had to go to Mrs. Berling again," Frederick said. "She had your current address."

"Dear Mrs. Berling," I murmured. "I consider her my eastern representative."

The waitress brought us drinks and departed.

"There are times when I believe that murder doesn't pay," Frederick said gloomily.

"You've got to look at the bright side of things. It keeps one mentally healthy."

"I thought that my troubles were over when I had you get rid of Senator Trotter."

The Senator had been one of my more successful and prestigious assignments. Not a suspicion that his death had been anything but the result of a simple automobile accident.

At the time Frederick had not chosen to reveal his motive for the elimination of the senator and I always respect my client's reticence about such matters. Now, however, all things were abundantly clear.

He sipped his drink. "The whole thing seemed so simple. I would simply step into the senator's shoes, lose an election or two, and then Hermione would get discouraged and allow me to enjoy the expensive leisure I've been bred to. But Hermione won't *let* me lose an election."

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cult. A careless public word here and there and you can manage to antagonize the entire electorate."

He almost whitened. "You don't *know* that woman. Entirely ruthless. It would be worth my life to do anything so obvious."

He glowered at his glass. "Do you know exactly what she has in store for me? After I win this election I've got to try for the Senate. And eventually she wants me to throw out the first baseball of the season at Griffith Park."

He tapped the table with a forefinger to emphasize his points. "I unequivocally *detest* politics. I am subjected to an endless parade of chicken and pea dinners; I am forced to endure television inquisition by panels of revoltingly bright college children; I live in perpetual fear of committing myself on any issue of importance. I've had to give up polo for golf. Hermione maintains that voters simply will not cotton to a polo player."

"But still," I said. "Hermione does have ten million dollars."

He laughed bitterly. "She limits me to an allowance of three hundred a month. And Edmund got two hundred of that. Now he wants three hundred."

"Emund?" I asked innocently. "Who's he?"

Frederick shrugged. "He's been blackmailing me for years."

"Ah," I said. "And you want to get rid of him? That's why you called me?"

Frederick appeared genuinely surprised. "Get rid of Edmund? Good heavens, no. It isn't worth killing him yet. Wait until he asks for a thousand."

"Then why did you call me?"

Frederick quickly tossed off his drink. "I want you to dispose of Hermione. Make it look like an accident."

"I invariably do. When do you want this to happen?"

"The sooner the better. Why not tonight? Around eight-thirty. I'll be on television and will have an impeccable alibi if I need one."

That was a bit too soon, I thought. I had to get rid of Edmund Peltier first and collect the twenty thousand from Hermione. "How about next Tuesday?"

Frederick was disappointed. "Are you sure you can't squeeze it in somehow before that? It shouldn't require more than an hour or two."

"I'm sorry, but I'm swamped with work and behind as it is. Next week is the best I can do."

He reconciled himself with another drink.

"There is the question of payment," I said. "I don't suppose you have money?"

"As soon as Hermione's estate is settled, I'll see that you get twenty thousand."

"Are you reasonably certain that you're in her will?"

"Well, no," he admitted. "But as her husband I occupy a favorable position."

I dislike working on speculation, but I agreed to accommodate him.

I left him ordering another drink and went on to the Parkinson Hotel. I pressed the buzzer beside door number 239.

The girl who answered had light hair, violet eyes, and a welcoming smile. "Why, if it isn't Mr. Rodney Boland. I'd recognize you anywhere."

Very few people know my name. Naturally I prefer it that way. "I'm sorry, but you have the advantage of me."

"We've never met," she said. "My name is Madelaine Wesley. But I've seen your photograph."

"Impossible," I said firmly. "I never allow my picture to be taken. Never."

"It was an enlarged candid camera shot that Mrs. Berling had framed. The picture was taken when you attended one of her garden parties. I really do believe that she has a crush on you."

Confound that Mrs. Berling, I thought. I would have to get that photograph before she showed it to the entire city.

"And now that I see you personally," Madelaine said, "I can understand why. You look as though you can barely tolerate people. Women just love that."

She stepped back. "Do come in."

I hesitated. "Perhaps I have the wrong suite? I came to see one Edmund Pelletier."

"You don't know him?"

"No. We've never met."

She smiled. "Then you are here to murder him?"

"My dear girl," I said stiffly. "Whatever gave you such a fantastic idea?"

"But I know all about you. Mrs. Berling told me everything. Everything. She's quite proud of you."

"How much is everything?" I asked dubiously.

"That your profession is murder and that you're very good at it."

I sincerely felt like strangling Mrs. Berling.

"But please come in," Madelaine said again. "You *do* look as though you could use a drink."

"It would be most appropriate at this time."

The rooms were well-furnished and vases of flowers were placed here and there.

She made a drink and brought it to the chair I had taken.

"Is this Edmund Pelletier's suite?" I asked.

"You've come to the right place, but I'm afraid that you're too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To murder Edmund," she said brightly. "The poor man passed away two weeks ago."

I took a generous swallow of the drink. "And just who are you? Besides being Madelaine Wesley, I mean."

"I'm Edmund's widow, but I've reassumed my maiden name. I've inherited Edmund's business."

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"Yes. Blackmail. Edmund left a whole card index file of names and all kinds of evidence in a safety deposit box. Mostly films. Edmund had a way of actually taking motion pictures of people when they were . . . doing things they shouldn't be." She smiled again. "So I imagine that actually I'm the one you really want to kill."

"Is that so?"

"Of course. Obviously one of Edmund's clients has decided that he will no longer tolerate being blackmailed." She sighed. "I don't know why everybody seems to think it's quite all right to murder blackmailers. They're people just like anybody else and they perform a useful function. Do you realize that if it weren't for blackmailers, a lot of people would wander blithely through life *unpunished*? The blackmailer is the dispenser of justice to those who would otherwise escape the consequences of their acts. He is every bit just like a judge in court who collects fines and costs."

There did seem to be an element of reason in her contention. So many of the more esoteric professions are sadly maligned. I, for instance, have often felt that I have made the world a much better place in which to live by judiciously decreasing the population.

"Now let me see," Madelaine said thoughtfully, "Of course you cannot expect to kill me at this moment. I have the evidence against

your client safely locked up and should I die, I have made arrangements that all should be revealed to the eager public."

Frankly, I doubted if what she said was true. Blackmailers seldom actually make such arrangements. They merely imply that they have made them as an insurance to a longer, more lucrative life. It is considered bad form to be vindictive from the grave. However, it is still unwise to act on the assumption that what is proper is always adhered to. Here and there you will find a blackmailer with absolutely no sense of ethics.

"So therefore," Madelaine continued, "Your opening gambit will be an attempt to *buy* the evidence from me? Isn't that right?"

It was.

She smiled. "However, even if you did succeed in purchasing the evidence, you would kill me anyway. Isn't that right? Otherwise your client would have sent a lawyer. But he *did* send a murderer."

The girl had a keen mind.

"By the way," she said, "just who is your client?"

Since we were in the process of possible negotiation, there was no need for me to be coy. "Frederick Combs."

"Ah," she said reflectively, "he's running for Congress, isn't he?"

"The fact has obviously come to your attention, since you have taken the opportunity of increasing your demand from two to three

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hundred dollars at this particular time."

Madelaine shook her head. "But that isn't the reason at all. Edmund always emphasized that a black-mailer who gets greedy kills the golden goose, besides also tempting his victim to violence. And so once Edmund and his victim reached an agreement, Edmund left the figure as it was, in perpetuity."

"His perpetuity, evidently."

"Well, yes," she admitted. "But I still intend basically following his dictum. However, first there must be an initial adjustment. You see, Edmund failed to allow for the flexible dollar, and such an oversight can hurt as time passes. Edmund's levy on Frederick Combs, for instance, was based on the purchasing power of a dollar eight years ago. But a dollar isn't worth what it used to be. The country is in the throes of a rising spiral of inflation. So while I ask three hundred of Combs now, it is merely to re-establish the true base on which both parties agreed and is actually the equivalent of two hundred dollars eight years ago."

The woman had a point there. Twenty thousand dollars today did seem to me to buy a bit less than it used to. I would have to begin asking twenty-five in the future.

"After this initial adjustment," Madelaine said, "I'm basing any increases—or decreases—on the national Cost of Living Index issued monthly by Washington. As a mat-

ter of fact, I was just figuring next month's payments when you knocked. For September, Combs will be required to pay three hundred dollars and seven cents."

Everything seems to go up, I thought sadly. "How many other people are you blackmailing?"

"Fourteen. Edmund was a hard worker, at his craft." She glanced at her watch. "I do believe that I read in the paper that Frederick Combs will be on television tonight. *Meet the Journalists*. Would you care to listen?"

I was comfortable in my chair, my drink was mellow, and I did have a curiosity to see how Frederick performed. "If you wish."

We suffered through the last seven minutes of a western before *Meet the Journalists* appeared.

The moderator made the introductions and as the camera swung from face to face I thought I detected some trepidation on the features of the four man panel. Combs, on the other hand, looked remarkably happy. He had an amiable grin for everyone.

The first question was asked and it became clear why Frederick was so moronically blissful. Evidently he had lingered at the cocktail bar until the last possible moment before leaving for the studio.

His voice was slurred and he took considerable time grasping the questions, much less answering them. I noticed that the moderator was perspiring.

Madelaine looked at me. "You don't suppose Combs is . . . ?"

"To the gills."

After five minutes, Frederick got the hiccups.

"Oh, dear," Madelaine said. "I imagine that thousands of people are watching."

"Possibly millions."

And then Frederick Combs fell off his chair.

In his defense, I must say that he did it with considerable aplomb. And apparently he found the floor comfortable, for he lay smiling beautifully and exhibited no discernible intention of rising.

The moderator made frantic gestures toward the camera and in a moment the screen became blank. A travelog on the Swiss Alps followed almost immediately.

Madelaine switched off the set. "That ends that political career."

It also put an end to my hopes for twenty thousand dollars from Hermione. She would now certainly throw Combs out of the house and whether he was blackmailed or not no longer concerned her.

I sighed for the lost twenty thousand and began thinking about the still attainable twenty thousand Frederick had promised me for disposing of Hermione. I would have to act before there was a change in her will or a divorce.

"Has this ruined the purpose of your visit?" Madelaine asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, anyway," she said soothingly. "Have another drink."

The next morning I was busy planning the immediate demise of Hermione when there came an imperious knock on my hotel room door.

Hermione's color was high and she stalked into the room, a furious Valkyrie bursting with vengeance. "I want him shot!"

I had no doubt whom she was referring to.

Her eyes sparked with anger. "Three years of hard work and the fool's ruined it in ten minutes."

"Please sit down."

But she remained standing. "Fifty thousand dollars for his hide nailed to the door!"

I hoped she was speaking figuratively, though from the nature of her temper she left some doubt.

"You could divorce him?" I suggested, but I offered that cheaper alternative only because I was certain her mood would not tolerate it.

"No," she said firmly. "He might sue me for support and he has a case. He's got to go."

It was hardly necessary to weigh Hermione's offer against Frederick's paltry inflation-ridden twenty thousand dollars. "Very well, I'll arrange some kind of an accident immediately."

"I don't even want it to look like an accident," she stated emphatically. "I want him shot."

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"It must be done tonight," Hermione said. "And I want the job done directly at the front gate of my estate."

I grasped the symbolism of her demand immediately. She had been cruelly wronged and she wanted Frederick sacrificed on her doorstep, so to speak.

"There is a gatehouse there," Hermione said. "But I have given the gatekeeper and his wife a vacation. The area will be isolated. Frederick is seeing his campaign managers tonight—to withdraw from the congressional race, of course—and he will return at ten. When he stops his car and gets out to open the gate, I want you to shoot him."

"You are certain he will be there at ten?"

The set of her jaw was firm. "He still obeys orders from me. Drunk or sober."

I don't particularly enjoy rush jobs, but I nodded. "You will provide yourself with some kind of an alibi?"

"I'll be in the house with a friend or two when we hear the shot."

At nine that evening, following Hermione's directions, I drove the winding river road until I found the entrance to her place. I parked my car a hundred yards beyond and returned to the gatehouse. The windows were dark, but to satisfy myself I knocked on the door and

even tried the knob. The place was locked and apparently deserted.

From the viewpoint of geography the setting was ideal. The area was innocent of passers-by and the lights of the main house were barely visible behind the pampered forest grounds. However I did not like a moon so full. Nor did I care for the light which illuminated the entrance.

I stepped into the bushes shadowed by the gatehouse and waited for Frederick to appear.

No traffic passed my stand until approximately five minutes to ten, when light beams flickered around turns and a hyperthyroid sedan appeared, slowing at the entrance. The vehicle stopped in front of the lighted gate and Frederick, after a bit of difficulty, got out of the driver's seat and swayed forward. He began fumbling at the gates.

I made certain that Frederick was alone, and then stepped out behind him. I do not believe that he even heard me.

His death was swift. One shot in the back and Frederick was efficiently exempt from any further political activity.

I returned to my car and after a mile of driving, I tossed the revolver out of a window. That night, I slept well, as I do after a successful night's work, and my dreams were pleasantly monetary.

At one o'clock the next afternoon, the knock I had been expecting came at my door.

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But Hermione Combs was not alone. She was accompanied by Madelaine Westley, and they were both smiling.

Needless to say, I entertained a premonition that something unpleasant was certainly about to happen.

"When I want medical services," Hermione said, "I go to a doctor."

I failed to grasp the purpose of that statement.

"When I want a murder, I go to a murderer."

Granted, I thought, but shall we go on?

"And when I want to blackmail somebody, I go to a blackmailer." She smiled with incredible self-satisfaction. "So naturally I went to see Edmund. But, of course, Edmund was dead. So I turned to Madelaine for help."

"Edmund taught me all those technical things," Madelaine said proudly. "About cameras, lighting, angles, and such."

"I am definitely pleased to state that you are photogenic," Hermione said.

"I developed the films last night," Madelaine said. "And we ran them. Your left profile is your best."

"My dear ladies," I said patiently, "would you trouble yourselves to make some sense?"

"When Frederick ruined everything," Hermione said, "I immediately determined that he was deadwood and must be done away with."

"I hope my services were satisfactory?"

"Eminently. Madelaine and I were in the gatehouse garret when you murdered Frederick. We had two cameras running—just in case one strip of film didn't turn out too well."

I'm afraid that my mouth dropped, though I do pride myself on self-possession. "You have *films* of me murdering Frederick?"

"Black and white," Madelaine said. "I don't know much about color photography. And besides, I don't think the gatehouse light was bright enough for them."

"We're going to blackmail you," Hermione said happily.

My smile was agony. "My dear Madam, you are insane."

"Not for money, of course," Hermione said.

I folded my arms. "Just what is it you want of me?"

She regarded me with frightening fondness. "I need a replacement for Frederick and I think you'll do perfectly. You will marry me and run for Congress."

I sat down. I remembered my philosophy professor who maintained that we must accept the inevitable with dignity and calm. He broke his neck five years ago when he calmly jumped out of a hotel window during a minor fire. Everyone else took the elevator down and survived.

"Just who has these films?" I asked.

"I have," Hermione said. "In a safe deposit box that will be opened by my lawyer if I should meet an untimely end."

That eliminated my only avenue of escape.

"I will see that you get the fifty thousand dollars for disposing of Frederick."

A feeble consolation, under the circumstances.

"And after we're married, you will receive three hundred dollars a month as an allowance."

"A thousand," I said firmly. "I am not putty."

And by being firm that became our agreement.

Hermione tells me that our future prospects are excellent. First the House of Representatives and then on to the Senate.

And in the July convention of 1972, if there is a dead-lock—say on the third ballot . . . ?

Well, who knows.

I now play golf. Not well, but often.



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